

WATER CONSERVATION

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Driest Eastbay winter so far; EBMUD thinks conservation ^{water}

By Carol Benfell and Terry Link
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This has been the driest winter ever recorded in the Eastbay, and directors of the East Bay Municipal Utility District are concerned that a drought may be in the making.

If the weather doesn't change, EBMUD may be asking residential consumers to voluntarily cut water usage, perhaps as early as Feb. 10.

Officials with smaller water districts in the two-county area — Contra Costa Water District and the Alameda County Water District — appeared less concerned yesterday about

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Eastbay going through its driest winter yet

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the rainfall shortage. But San Francisco's Hetch Hetchy Water and Power System is already printing up water conservation notices for its customers.

EBMUD — which serves 1.1 million people in Alameda and Contra Costa counties — has already begun water conservation measures.

The utility has cut back the amount of water it releases from its reservoirs and is doubling its efforts at cloud-seeding to produce rain and snow, according to a report given to the board yesterday.

However, the EBMUD board delayed any decision to ask consumers to conserve water — a recognition that last winter most of the rain fell in February and March.

"Next month is the critical period," said EBMUD General Manager Jerome Gilbert. "We have had only 34 percent of the normal amount of precipitation to date — less than either of the two drought years of 1976 and 1977."

EBMUD has been keeping records on rain and snowfall for some 70 years. For the past 50 winters, there has been an average of some 40 inches of precipitation by January in the Mokelumne River basin, from which the utility draws its water. This year, only about 9 inches of rain had fallen by the beginning of January and the snowpack was less than 20 percent of normal level.

EBMUD Director Helen Burke, of Berkeley, urged the board to take action immediately.

"We are at a critical juncture," she said. "We need to begin conserving now, so that if dry conditions continue we will be prepared."

Among other things, Burke said the district should immediately begin to distribute water-saving devices, examine water usage of commercial and industrial customers for possible conservation and launch a public information blitz.

Other board members appeared to share the sentiments of board President Sanford Skaggs, of the San Ramon Valley area, who argued for waiting until the next board meeting, two weeks away.

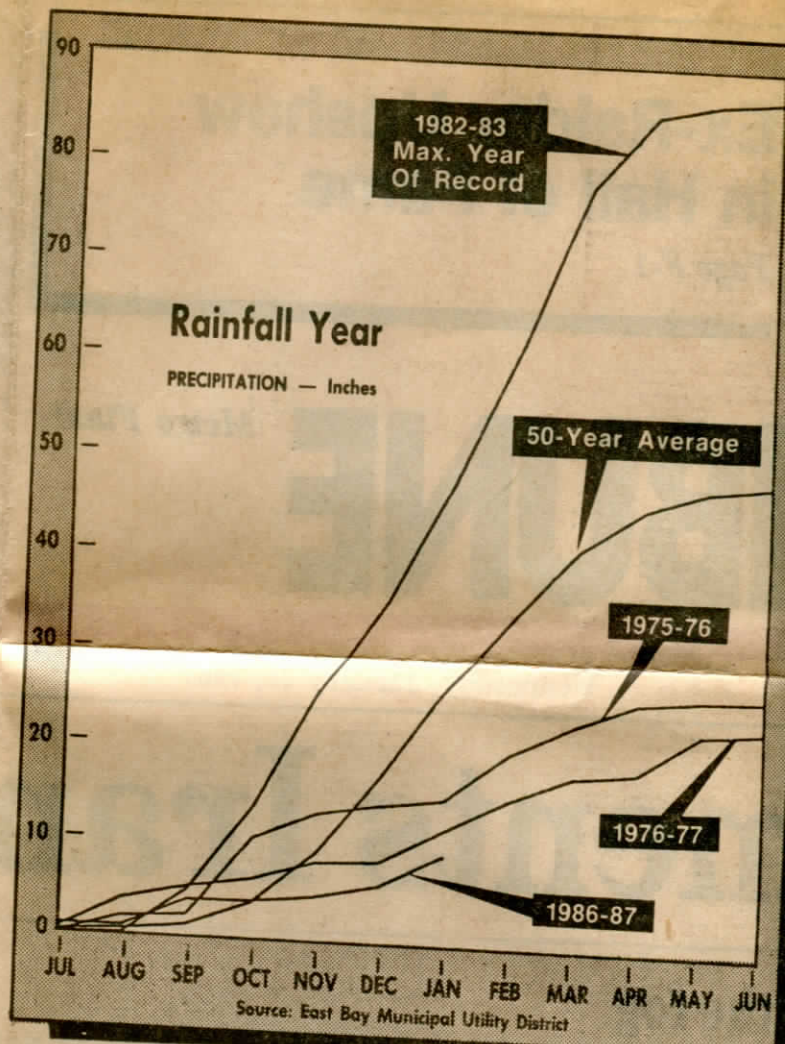
"We have a policy in place that provides a measured and meaningful response. We don't want to play Chicken Little because if we are proven wrong, next time we may have a harder time convincing people," Skaggs said.

In the two southern Alameda County districts served by Hetch Hetchy, officials said water supplies may be down, but they do not anticipate shortages.

James Lundgren, deputy director of public works and utilities for the City of Hayward, said Hetch Hetchy supplies all of his city's water, but the city's contract allows for an unlimited supply.

"Our contract calls for 'an unlimited supply into perpetuity,'" Lundgren said. Hayward uses only a small percentage of Hetch Hetchy's output, he added, "and we have first call."

Hetch Hetchy officials have not asked Hayward customers to



By Frank Pennock Jr./The Tribune

take any conservation measures, Lundgren said.

Roy Coverdale, general manager of the Alameda County Water District, said his district receives water from Hetch Hetchy, but also buys water from the state and stores it in aquifers along Alameda Creek.

The third source for the district, which serves 250,000 people in Union City, Fremont and Newark, is local runoff, Coverdale said, which is pumped from

the ground as necessary.

Likewise, the Contra Costa Water District shouldn't have problems accommodating its customers, said Austin Nelson, chief of water supply there.

Nelson said the Contra Costa district buys its water from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Its contract calls for the purchase of up to 195,000 acre feet of water. Annual use by the system's 300,000 customers is 90,000 to 100,000 acre feet, Nelson said.